

The Soul of Kelly Strayhorn



The Pittsburgh theater proudly uses the tradition of network building and diverse arts as platforms for liberation.

By Liberty Ferda

You don't go to the [Kelly Strayhorn Theater](#) simply to be entertained.

You might not even stay in your seat for a whole show.

For example, in August, artist Ada Pinkston pulled seven attendees, including a 4-year-old, onstage to dance during her multimedia performance called "Searching for Mother Tongues." The show combined movement, sound, and visuals evoking the loss of African language and culture for descendants of the transatlantic slave trade. The Maryland-based artist's work reflects the mission of Kelly Strayhorn.

That mission is to be a home for creative experimentation, community dialogue, and collective action rooted in the liberation of Black and queer people.

"We are committed to contemporary performance, which often pushes form. It asks questions and doesn't leave us comfortable in our seats," says Executive Director Joseph Hall. "It's not entertainment. It's call and response. It's how we protest. It's how we survive."

To tell the story of Kelly Strayhorn Theater is, in some ways, to tell the story of survival.

The history of the original building near the corner of Penn and Highland avenues in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood goes back to 1914. First called the Regent Theater, it opened as a photoplay house screening silent films and later features and animations. The theater reflected the ups and downs of the surrounding area, active during the 1950s when East Liberty boasted nine theaters and was considered Pittsburgh's "prosperous second downtown," and sitting dark for long stretches as it weathered economic decline and failed urban renewal projects that blighted the neighborhood.

The theater survived, though. Thanks to creative fundraising efforts and the foundation community's support – including The Heinz Endowments – the building received much-needed repair and remodeling in 2000. The following year it reopened as an affordable midsize rental venue for small arts organizations. It also had a new name, Kelly Strayhorn Theater, or KST, which honored two Pittsburgh artists: dancer and Hollywood movie legend Gene Kelly and jazz artist Billy Strayhorn.

Then Janera Solomon was hired as executive director. Born in Guyana, raised in Pittsburgh, and educated at Harvard Business School, Ms. Solomon sought to celebrate and honor African tradition through art. She helped launch and develop several African American cultural institutions and museums, including San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora, the Brooklyn Museum, and the August Wilson African American Cultural Center in Pittsburgh. At KST, Ms. Solomon helped the theater grow exponentially, quadrupling its operating budget within a decade. It also began offering original programming that attracted diverse audiences and hosting some of today's most accomplished dancers and choreographers, including Kyle Abraham, Camille A. Brown, Thaddeus Phillips, Sidra Bell, Sean Dorsey, Jaamil Kosoko and Bill Shannon. Also, Ms. Solomon managed the 2011 merger of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater and Dance Alloy, a dance instruction school a few blocks down Penn Avenue that offers affordable dance classes for all ages.

Mr. Hall began as executive director in 2020, when Ms. Solomon stepped down. After earning a fine arts degree from New York State's Houghton University, Mr. Hall built an impressive career in the arts. He co-led BAAD! The Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance as deputy director, where he strengthened fundraising, community outreach and presenting performances that empowered women, people of color and the LGBTQ community. He served as a selection committee member for the New York Dance and Performance Awards and was recognized as an emerging leader by the New York Foundation for the Arts. In September 2022, Mr. Hall was named 40 Under 40 by Pittsburgh Magazine.

But his contribution to KST's growth began when he was an intern in 2009, and later as a producing director, launching creative programs like the "My People" film, performance and discussion series and the Freshworks residency series and collaborations with choreographer and visual artist Staycee Pearl for what is now the Pearl Diving Movement Residency.

Mr. Hall and Ms. Solomon's vibrant leadership helped solidify KST as a cultural institution firmly rooted in the long tradition of liberation movements throughout history — think the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

“Art is a catalyst and motivator and gets us to take action,” Mr. Hall says. “I think about this moment in time politically juxtaposed with the late ’60s and ’70s and the phenomenal arts that were created as part of that activism. Here you’ll see artists that aren’t afraid to delve into issues of socio-economic status and identity. It’s always political.”

Today KST’s reach averages 25,000 people annually, including workshop participants and performance attendees.

These numbers only tell half the story of KST’s impact, though. Many emerging artists have been supported by KST for years behind the scenes, with residencies, showings, and more. “Art takes time,” Mr. Hall says. “We invest in artists and build relationships with them over decades.”

Formerly a program manager at 651 ARTS in Brooklyn, which is a member of the National Performance Network, an organization that “builds relationships and reciprocity” among performing arts institutions around the country, Mr. Hall knows about nurturing connections within the art world. (Kelly Strayhorn is also a member.) And as a performer himself, he knows about the time commitment it takes to produce.

The relationship building and support KST offers artists naturally gives rise to networking that helps launch careers. Often the theater will present visiting artists and host public workshops and welcome dinners where they can meet the tight-knit community of artists in Pittsburgh.

Mr. Hall likes to think of choreographer and performer Jasmine Hearn. Ms. Hearn lived in Pittsburgh and, through work with KST, met and began collaborating with New-York-based artist Marjani Forté-Saunders and Philadelphia-based Kate Watson Wallace, growing their network and opportunities. Ms. Hearn went on to work with big names like Solange Knowles and win three “Bessie” performance awards, named in honor of influential choreographer and teacher Bessie Schönberg. KST is proud to have been part of that networking, says Mr. Hall, and continues to present the work of both Ms. Forté-Saunders and Ms. Hearn.

KST contributes to art development around the globe but continues to be rooted in local artists and arts organizations, which factored into its selection as one of Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures, a grantmaking initiative funded by The Heinz Endowments and the Ford Foundation. The theater is the center of a web of Black arts organizations in Pittsburgh and has strong ties and long history with other Cultural Treasures grant recipients.

Take PearlArts, the local dance organization that is in residence at KST’s Alloy Studios and presented Ms. Pinkston’s “Mother Tongues” show. PearlArts backed Ms. Pinkston with a one-month residency that offered equipment, technical and editing support, and a stipend to cover living expenses. KST has worked closely with, offered performance space, and hosted residencies for, among others, BOOM Concepts (also a Cultural Treasure), the Legacy Arts Project (Cultural Treasure), the Balafon West African Dance Ensemble (Cultural Treasure), and New Horizon Theater (yes, also a Cultural Treasure).

However, even with such impact and a strong network, survival is not a given.

Two weeks after Mr. Hall took the reins as executive director in March 2020, in-person programming screeched to a halt amid the COVID-19 pandemic. That included the annual community fundraiser “Full Bloom” that brings in donations KST relies on. The organization pivoted and offered virtual programming when possible and moved the fundraiser online. Still, like many arts organizations, KST is in a precarious situation, says Mr. Hall.

So, being named a Cultural Treasure with \$750,000 in unrestricted funding attached is a welcome boost.

“I really believe that KST is a cultural treasure, not only in Pittsburgh but nationally, so it’s nice to receive that recognition of all the work by staff, board, community, the artists, our funders and stakeholders, all who helped make KST what it is today,” Mr. Hall says.

With the money, KST will continue more of what it has been doing: supporting the next generation of creators around the world, building relationships, maintaining a web of local art, and doing it all with surer footing.

The theater’s trademark marquee with neon lettering will keep glowing every night on Penn Avenue, as East Liberty continues to change around it. The neighborhood boasts a number of new restaurants, juice bars, big retailers, and luxury housing and is considered one of the hottest real estate markets in town. Many see KST as a beacon of home that honors the culture of longtime Black residents.

“KST helps give an identity to East Liberty,” Mr. Hall says. “We have to invest in the culture in order for folks to stay and be proud. Without culture, what then is a neighborhood? What then is a home?”

It’s a critical question at a critical time. KST’s lease expires in 2029, just six years from now. To stay in its “home,” KST is seeking to negotiate a 29-year lease agreement with the property owners.

So far, a year has passed with no resolution or clear communication from McKnight Realty on the status of a long-term offer, Mr. Hall says. The developer, earlier in the year, presented a redevelopment plan for the building in a public hearing. Nearly 30 community members testified against their project. KST had hoped to execute an agreement before October 2022 to best plan for its role in creating a dynamic, arts-vibrant community.

Despite the challenge, KST moves forward with programming. The theme this year is “The Soul of East Liberty.” The New York-based group 7NMS will present a live performance of “Prophet: The Order of Lyricism,” about the life and art of hip-hop emcees, coinciding with presentations by local emcees. The stage will open for youth to perform at a Halloween Mayhem party.

Two Freshworks residencies will begin this fall, where artists of varying disciplines will develop new ideas and show them on the first Friday of the month, coinciding with Penn Avenue’s

Unblurred gallery crawl. The Alloy School will continue to offer nine-week community dance programs — including West African dance — culminating in a family showcase and dance party.

Don't expect to stay in your seat for any of it.

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